

Dorling, D. (2012) Population: the future is caring, The Guardian, 1st October,  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/oct/01/population-future-caring-ageing-good-news>

## Population: the future is caring

o Don't panic. An ageing population is good news for the environment, for growth and for childcare



Elderly people work out with wooden dumbbells in the grounds of a temple in Tokyo on Japan's Respect for the Aged Day. Photograph: Yoshikazu Tsuno/AFP/Getty Images

A [new report](#) that came out on Monday from the UN focused, like most new reports, on something we already knew. The great news is that by 2050 there are expected to be more people aged over 60 than under 15. Something very big is going on, wrote Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary general. He warned that the "... social and economic implications of this phenomenon are profound, extending far beyond the individual older person and the immediate family, touching broader society and the global community in unprecedented ways."

Demographic change on the scale we are currently experiencing does have a precedent. It was just a very long time ago: the [Neolithic revolution](#). The population expansion and subsequent sustainability as humans first settled the land and established permanent villages is the nearest precedent we have for what we are currently living through. Today the shift is from village to city, rather than from nomadic existence to village. Again there has been a population explosion as part of the transition, and again we are facing the slow down following a period of rapid growth – a little like a human algae bloom coming to an end.

So what will a stable and older population look like? Our best clues are those societies that have already made the transition: look at [Japan over the past couple of decades](#). Life expectancy will be very high and, barring years of natural disaster, should be expected to continue to slowly rise. Couples will on average have fewer than two children, so the population will slowly decline in size. There will be less overcrowding as this occurs. Transport will be largely publicly provided, and a large majority of the population will live in cities. Tokyo shows that it is possible for 30 million people to live in close proximity and relative harmony.

There are other models in Asia to consider as well. In Hong Kong and Macau fertility rates may be even lower than in Japan. Across the megacities of mainland China there are schemes in place to adapt cities to work without private cars and, since 2009, according to a Washington thinktank [China has been leading the world in clean energy investments](#). China is preparing for the demographic transition and a future in which many groups of grandparents only have one grandchild between the four of them.

Across almost all of Europe, other than in the UK, [population numbers are either in decline](#), or the slow population growth which exists is decelerating. In Germany and Italy numbers have been falling for some time. Ageing is accelerating as a result. When this is badly managed, it results in the young deserting rural areas too quickly, for the lure of bright lights and more young people.

Where ageing is managed well, people continue to mix. As Aneurin Bevan explained long before my grandfather [aged 96] became old: "I hope the old people will not be asked to live in colonies of their own – they do not want to look out of their windows on an endless procession of funerals of their friends; they also want to look out at perambulators. "The elderly require far less care than the young. Most people even in their 90s are still looking after themselves most of the time. It is the young, and especially the very young, who require intensive care and attention, particularly if they are to grow up well adjusted. At times, as [Oliver James so clearly explains in "love bombing"](#), all of us as children need the kind of one-to-one attention over a long period of time that increasingly modern life appears designed to prevent. In this regard although we may sometimes talk with fear of entering a second childhood, the elderly are not at all like the young.

And a growing number of elderly people provides more potential carers for the dwindling numbers of children in the world, the children who their children give birth to. This is part of the reason why [12,000 fewer children under the age of five died daily in 2010 than in 1990](#) – despite there being more children at risk, despite a billion still going hungry. Children in poor countries with surviving grandmothers nearby are far more likely to survive childhood themselves. As yet the benefits of grandfathers have to be proven, but hopefully they soon will.

Finally, what of countries like Britain and the United States that continue to try to put off ageing through relatively high rates of fertility and in-migration of young people? It is most likely that people continue to be drawn into these two places because so many have English as a second language, and there is a surfeit of low paid jobs and other opportunities at the bottom of the economic scale. Delayed childbirth due to middle class women having to compete more for work for longer in these two more unequal affluent economies may have also played a part, but even here there is evidence that current demographics may help.

UK public sector debt is forecast to soon exceed 80% of GDP. In July Britain's Office for Budget Responsibility produced estimates that this could fall to 40% by

2050 if migrants continued to arrive in similar numbers, and so share the debt burden. In contrast a zero net migration policy – this government's stated aim – would result in public sector debt rising to 120% of GDP by 2050.

Over half the couples in the world are having fewer than two children each. This is partly because almost everywhere infant mortality is falling, globally faster today than at any time in human history. It is when this happens that people almost everywhere become brave enough to limit their families to an average of two or fewer children and so our average age increases rapidly.

For a while in the rich world we need not age as quickly as we otherwise might. If more young migrants moved towards where the global elderly are concentrated, in our rich countries, this would slow down population growth and enhance global ageing as people quickly assimilate to the fertility rates of the places they move to. The future is bright; the future is grey, urban, caring, low-growth and green. We just have to get there.